

# **HANDLING DISASTER-RELATED STRESS**

## *Tips for Coping with Disaster*

Disasters affect our lives like no other phenomena. For those of us affected directly, they generate a sense of anxiety that can destroy our peace of mind. They can create fears that wake us in the night and intrude on our thoughts during the day. They can break our ability to concentrate and turn small problems into huge issues. And even for those of us not affected, disasters have profound impact on our lives by robbing us of our personal sense of control and security.

In short, disasters create a tremendous amount of stress. If this stress goes unrecognized and unmanaged, it can severely damage a person's mental and physical health. It can increase until it is impossible to cope mentally with everyday problems or to resist stress-related physical illnesses such as high blood pressure, ulcers, and heart disease.

If you recognize and handle stress properly, however, it can become something healthy that gets you through the challenges of each day and the trauma of another disaster. This fact sheet should give you the information needed to adjust.

### ***What is stress?***

Stress is a unique and personal response from our bodies and minds to meet the demands of different situations. These situations trigger an instinctive "fight or flight" response that increases blood pressure, heart rate, respiration, and blood flow to muscles. Mentally, we focus our attention and intellect on the matters at hand.

Originally, these reactions helped people prepare for a physical conflict, or to escape from one. Now, they usually serve to direct our mental and physical resources to a particularly difficult or trying situation with positive results. Sometimes, though, these events last longer than our ability to cope with them, as when disaster strikes. When disasters happen, we experience feelings of *distress*, or negative stress. If this negative stress is left unmanaged, the risk for stress-related health problems, interpersonal conflicts, and even domestic violence becomes much more likely. To counter such responses, you must learn how to recognize negative stress, and then learn how to help it work for you.

### ***How do I know if I'm experiencing negative stress?***

Stress affects everyone differently. What might indicate negative stress in one person might be a personality trait in another. In most cases, though, there are warning signs that indicate a need for active stress management.

These signs include:

- persistent fatigue
- inability to concentrate
- flashes of anger, lashing out at friends and family
- changes in eating and sleeping habits
- prolonged tension headaches, lower backaches, stomachaches, or other physical ailments
- prolonged feelings of depression, anxiety, or helplessness

### ***How do I manage stress?***

Just as stress affects everyone differently, each person finds different ways to cope. Some approaches that help you manage negative stress in your life are to:

Talk it out. You're not in this alone. Your family, friends, and neighbors are feeling some of the same anxieties you're experiencing. Share your feelings and listen to what they share. Other sources of support can be found in your community mental health center or in your church.

Try physical activity. Release the tension of stress by developing a regular exercise routine. Try walking in the evenings or some stretching exercise. If you have a physical disability, consult a physician to determine what kind of exercise is right for you.

Know your limits and make time for relaxation. Sometimes exercising or talking about your feelings only work briefly before something reminds you of the disaster and again creates anxiety. It's important to remember that disasters are beyond your control. Try to reduce the amount of time you spend worrying about the things you cannot change. Cut down or eliminate the activities that cause you stress. If coverage of the disaster on the evening news or in the morning paper leaves you stressed or anxious, simply reduce the amount of time you spend reading or watching the news. Use that time to involve yourself in activities you find enjoyable and relaxing, such as reading a book, visiting with friends, or helping others that are affected.

Take control. You can't control disasters or the damage caused by them. Admit that certain things are beyond your control and then regularly remind yourself of your strengths and abilities. It is important to remember that you can control your reactions.

If you feel your problem is more serious or if you're experiencing hopelessness or extreme anger, you may want to consider professional help from a counselor, social worker, psychologist, or psychiatrist.